BOB TOMAINE: CARBONDALE CITY HALL

Ever heard the old line about fighting City Hall?

There's a group of people in Carbondale who've given it a new twist — they're fighting *for* City Hall.

If you've ever taken the time to notice, Carbondale City Hall is an imposing structure. Completed in 1894 by W.D. Stevens of Binghamton and George H. Tryon of Carbondale, it is actually the third City Hall to have stood on the site.

The first, built in 1852, was a rather small, wooden structure. Designed in the Greek revival style of architecture, it survived until February 14, 1859, when it was destroyed by fire. Regrettably, there is only one known picture of it, from *"Carbondale, 1901,"* the fifty year celebration of the city's existence.

After the fire, a large two-story brick building was erected. This served the purposes of the city until 1894. At this time the City Hall which stands today was created by making use of the existing building, and adding a large three-story wing across the front, and a tower. The Romanesque revival design of the brick and bluestone structure was planned by an architect from Binghamton, Truman Lacey, who also made the plans for the joining of the old wing to the new.

City Hall, the symbol at one time of a prosperous, vital community, has withstood the ravages of time rather well — particularly when one considers that, like most cities in our area, Carbondale is not in a financial position to maintain the building to the degree it requires. The last few years have taken their toll.

Much of the slate roof, for example, is in need of repair. The entire third floor, with the exception of one room, is closed off to save heating expenses. Even the bricks are now starting to show their age, as was proven when several test areas were cleaned recently, restoring their original color.

But, contrary to the beliefs of many, City Hall is *not* falling down, nor is it being ignored.

Just over a year ago, the Carbondale Area Chamber of Commerce held a meeting at which the main speaker, Major Lee White, said that the best thing to do was "... put a rope around it and pull it down." White, a well-known industrial development figure in the area, felt that the fact that the building was in such sad condition indicated the lack of pride in Carbondale.

His comments were carried in the *Carbondale News*, and attracted the attention of S. Robert Powell, a local resident working in New York who publishes the historical quarterly, *Northeastern Pennsylvania*. Powell, incensed at the thought of someone even suggesting that City Hall be torn down, contacted the *News* and brought up the idea that the building should be saved. Through much letter writing and numerous phone calls (not to mention a $100 donation from Powell), the Committee to Restore Carbondale City Hall was born.

Several meetings were quickly held, and a surprising number of people came forward in support of the committee and its goals. At one of these early meetings, it was suggested that one of the first priorities should be something very visible, to let the entire city know that the group was indeed serious. What would be more visible than repairing the tower clock and chimes?

One local resident had tried to repair it before. Tom Brennan, a Carbondale fireman, had spent many hours in the clock chamber, but each time it was repaired, it only ran a short while before another part failed. However, he was familiar with the machinery, and he had researched the idea of finding a person who knew exactly how to fix it. When the committee agreed that this would be the first project, Brennan simply produced the name of the man who could repair it.

Robert Rodgers, of the Rodgers Clock Service in Harrisburg, visited Carbondale shortly afterwards to inspect the clock. Essentially, he said, it would require a completely new clock, at a cost of $3,000. The committee agreed and began the fund-raising.

In less than three months, the clock was again functioning. New lights were installed behind the glass faces to replace the hanging filament bulbs which barely illuminated the glass. Layers of paint were scraped from the inside of the four faces. With the new mercury vapor lights and the faces transmitting more light, the clock could now be seen — and read — from all over town.

The clock caused more people to realize that the group was indeed serious. Donations, while not nearly sufficient to restore the entire structure, continue to come in. "It seems like we've awakened people," said Powell. "We're very surprised and, of course, very pleased that so many area residents can see the value of what we're trying to do."

Powell, probably more than anyone, knows the problems facing the group. "We don't get much outright hostility; it's more just plain apathy. We do, of course, occasionally hear the cries of 'Tear it down, put up a new one,' but most people are incredibly supportive of the effort. When our group sponsored a film and lecture series during Pioneer Days, we had only hoped to raise a little interest in the history of the building and the area. We were truly astounded at the number of people who attended, and the interest they expressed in the restoration effort."

"Like most other projects of this nature, our main problem is lack of money," Powell explained. "We'll do a lot of the work ourselves, but there are things that are well beyond our skills. The roof is one example, and things like cleaning and repainting the bricks. But we're realistic. We know we won't have a newly restored City Hall by next summer. If it takes ten years, fine, it takes ten years."

Powell has a tendency to become a philosopher when he speaks of the building itself. "At least one reason we're doing what we're doing is to show that Carbondale is proud of itself."

"It's sad that the City of Carbondale really has *had* to neglect it," Powell concluded. "They simply don't have the money to maintain it properly. But it's interesting that even as it is today, it's still a very impressive, very beautiful symbol of the city."

With Powell's outlook, shared by just about the entire committee and a good percentage of the residents of Carbondale, it's hard to imagine anything but success in the restoration effort.

(Further information on the Committee to Restore Carbondale City Hall can be obtained by writing the committee at Box 151, Carbondale, PA 18407.)

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